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The defective defection of Comrade Vitaly



WASHINGTON—Vitaly Yurchenko was a genuine, top-level Soviet intelligence defector, and how we managed to lose him is a lesson in the misuse of intelligence for political purposes.

We were not taken in by a plant. We were not deceived by a super-clever KGB plot. We bungled this all by ourselves.

First, Yurchenko was real. "We know enough about the KGB to know who their deputy director of operations is," says Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former member of the Senate Select Intelligence Committee. "That was Yurchenko. He was genuine."

By defecting to the United States in Rome on Aug. 1, he took his life into his hands—and placed at risk the lives of family and associates he left behind.

"The one thing he had going for him was anonymity," says an official who believes the case was mishandled. "A defector is like an informant for the FBI who goes into the federal witness protection program. He must be given the utmost faith in his own physical security. Otherwise, he knows he'll be found and killed or his relatives will be killed."

Instead, the administration swiftly leaked word of Yurchenko's defection. It fit too well with one of the Reagan's pet theories: The Soviet Marxist-Leninist elite knows that its system has failed. The proof: The cream of the crop—the KGB, the most privileged class in Soviet society—is defecting to the West for ideological reasons. The temptation to brag was overwhelming.

Instead of denying any knowledge of Yurchenko, intelligence officials told the Los Angeles Times on Sept. 25 exactly how and where he had defected. Yurchenko was credited with disclosing the Soviet use of spy dust to track American diplomats in Moscow.

Next we learned that Yurchenko had identified a former CIA agent who was spying for the Russians, Edward L. Howard. A story in the Wall Street Journal Oct. 13 compounded that leak by naming a Soviet agent, working for

the U.S., who had been betrayed by Howard.

Our spy, A.G. Tolkachev, "was one of the Central Intelligence Agency's most valuable human assets in the Soviet Union," a Journal editorial writer helpfully told the Russians. For all we know, at the time the Journal article appeared, Tolkachev was sitting in the basement of Lubyanka prison, denying through the remnants of his teeth that he was a CIA agent. The leak to the Journal took away his last shred of protection.

To Yurchenko, allowed to read the newspapers at his Virginia safe house, these leaks broke the basic rules of espionage: Never tell your enemy what you know about him. Never confirm the value of what he thinks he knows about you.

There was more to come. On Oct. 30, word was put out that Yurchenko had solved the disappearance of Nicholas Shadrin, a Soviet defector working for the CIA who vanished in Vienna in 1975. Yurchenko told the FBI that KGB agents had kidnapped and killed Shadrin.

Yurchenko turned on his CIA captors after this revelation. In the most agitated moment at his extraordinary press conference last Monday, Yurchenko recalled saying to his handlers: "Aren't you ashamed? I don't know anything about Shadrin. You publish that in the newspapers and they will start a suit against the CIA. That means they invite me into court as a defendant in a trial, as the only witness to this information."

Yurchenko could see his million-dollar payoff vanish in a wrongful-death suit filed by Shadrin's widow, Ewa. His fantasized love affair with the

wife of a Soviet diplomat in Canada exploded in his face. (When the CIA got them together, she told him, "I loved you as a KGB man, not as a traitor.")

And even the bodyguards for whom he had such contempt knew the details of his secret \$1 million contract with the CIA. When Yurchenko complained that one of them was putting his feet on the cocktail table, the guard replied, "Oh, that's right. I forgot they gave you the furniture, too."

IT WAS TOO much. Instead of secrecy, there was a glare of publicity. Instead of security, his name was all over town. Instead of money, there was the prospect of a lawsuit. Instead of a professional intelligence operation, there was, to his mind, continual bungling.

He concluded he was better off back home, and he just walked away.